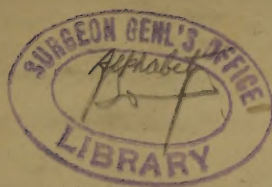


Beard (Geo. M.)

On the decline of the moral  
faculties in old age







DR. GEORGE M. BEARD'S LECTURE  
before the Long Island Historical Society,  
ON THE DECLINE OF THE MORAL FACULTIES  
IN OLD AGE.

THE lecturer began by giving a résumé of papers previously read before the Society, on *Young Men in History; an Inquiry into the Relation of Age to Work*. He stated that from an analysis of the lives of 1000 representative men in all the great branches of human effort, he had made the discovery that the golden decade was between thirty and forty; the silver between forty and fifty; the brazen between twenty and thirty; the iron between fifty and sixty, and so on. The superiority of youth and middle life over old age in *original* work appears all the greater when we consider the fact that nearly all the positions of honor, and profit, and prestige—professorships, and public stations—and nearly all the money of the world, are in the hands of the old. Reputation, like money and prestige, is mainly confined to the old.

Very few young men are greatly famous, for fame is a plant of slow growth—first the blade, then after a time the ear, then, after many years, perhaps not until long after death, the full corn in the ear. Men are not widely known until long after they have done the work that gives them their fame.

Portraits of great men are a delusion; statues are lies. They are taken when men have become greatly famous, which, on the average, is at least twenty-five years after they did the work that gave them their fame. The statue of Morse in the Central Park represents a most excellent gentleman, but not the discoverer of the Telegraph. Morse at seventy could no more have conceived and completed his great discovery than he could have reached out his hands and brought the planet Jupiter from the skies. He insisted on the distinction between *original* and *routine* work, claiming that the former was best done by those under forty-five, the latter might be as well or better done by those in advanced life, or by the very young.

Original work required *enthusiasm*; routine work *experience*. In society both forces are needed; one makes the world move, the other keeps it steady.

If all the results of the original work done by men under forty-five were annihilated, the world would be reduced to barbarism. Men are at their best at that time when enthusiasm and experience are most evenly balanced; this period on the average is from thirty-eight to forty. After this period the law is that experience increases, but enthusiasm declines.

The people unconsciously recognize this distinction between the work that demands enthusiasm and that which demands experience, for they prefer old doctors and old lawyers, while in the clerical profession, where success depends on the ability to constantly originate and express thought, young men are the more popular, and old men, even of great ability, are shelved or neglected. In the editorial profession original work was demanded, and most of the editorials of our daily press were written by very young men. In the life of almost every old man there comes a point sooner or later when experience ceases to have any educating power.

To this general law, as to nearly all other general laws, there are many individual exceptions. The most marked exceptions to the law are found in the realm of *imagination*; some of the greatest poets, painters and sculptors, such as Dryden, Bryant, Richardson, Cowper, Young, De Foe, Titian and Michael Angelo, have done a part of their very best work in advanced life. The imagery both of Bacon and of Burke seemed to increase in richness as they grew older.

On the other hand, in the realm of *reason, philosophic thought, invention and discovery*, the exceptions are very rare. Nearly all the great systems of theology, metaphysics and philosophy, are the result of work done



between twenty and fifty. The exceptions are both ways, and there are some who, like Napoleon, reach their prime long before thirty-eight.

*In the whole recorded history of the human race, no great invention or discovery has been conceived and completed by any one over sixty.* The lecturer had also discovered by statistical examination that the golden decade for criminals was between twenty and thirty—nearly all the first class crimes of the world being done by boys and young men under thirty-five.

He had discovered also that the same law applied to animals. Horses lived to be about twenty-five, and were at their best from eight to fourteen; this corresponded to the golden decade of man. Dogs lived nine or ten years, and were best for the hunt between two and six. Plants also appear to be subject to the same law. Fruit-bearing trees are most prolific at a time of their average life corresponding pretty nearly to the golden and silver decades of man. Children born of parents one or both of whom are between twenty-five and forty, are on the average stronger and smarter than those born of parents one or both of whom are much younger or older than this. The same applies to the breeding of horses, dogs, and probably of other animals.

The generalization broadly stated is that in all organic beings *there is a period when the productive power is greatest, and this not late, but early—not far from the middle of the average life.*

In this lecture he would go a step farther and submit the *moral faculties* to the same investigation. He would ask the audience to accompany him in two assumptions, (1) That the brain was the organ of the moral faculties, and (2) That the men whose lives he should refer to had really declined in their moral faculties.

The audience might differ from his estimate of men; but if he could make clear the *principles* and methods by which the subject is to be studied, his object would be accomplished.

It does not follow that *all* people suffer decline of the moral faculties in old age; with many their last days are their best days. Some, like Charles James Fox, the English orator, after a youth and manhood of dissipation, settle down to an old age of quiet and dignified virtue.

When a man declines in moral principles, he does not necessarily become a horse thief; a loss of active *moral enthusiasm* is frequently all that is noticed.

There are *three* causes of moral decline in old age.

1. The over-exercise through life of the lower at the expense of the higher nature. Thus it has long been observed and admitted that conscience becomes less sensitive, and that vanity, avarice, ambition, and a disposition to petulance and irritability, increase with years. This is the *physiological* cause.

2. Disease of the brain or of other parts of the body that react on the brain. The diseases to which the brain is liable are infinite. Strange results may follow from even slight injuries to the head, or mere molecular perturbations of the cerebral structure. The lecturer related striking cases that had come under his own observation—how a kick from a horse had destroyed memory of numbers of houses and locality—how a bereavement had destroyed memory of names; how millionnaires once liberal, in old age had grown absurdly penurious; how hemorrhages in the brain and serious disorders of the cranial cavity have gradually or suddenly made the clever foolish, the patient petulant, the hopeful despondent; had caused men to change almost instantaneously their religious, social and political doctrines.

Among the diseased conditions of the brain that cause moral decline in old age, are degeneration of the arteries, with morbid deposits, atrophy, and hardening of the nerve substance, with increase of the connective tissue; inflammation; softening; persistent congestion or anemia; tumor in the brain; hemorrhage; thrombosis; embolism; poisons in the blood, and exhaustion of nerve force, (neurasthenia,) and probably simple molecular disturbance.

Cases of moral decline from these causes he remarked are continually under his observation and treatment, and they are sufficiently familiar to all students of diseases of the nervous system.



3. Intellectual decline. The intellect is the eye of conscience, and when that is blinded by disease or the decay of age men cannot distinguish the true faith, even though they desire to do so. The two last causes are *pathological*.

In private life illustrations of the theme are numerous enough, but in a public discourse, the lives of celebrities, living and dead, serve best to enforce these views.

Far more than is supposed the martyrs of history have been young men.

The decline of the moral faculties in old age may be illustrated by studying the lives of the following historic characters, Demosthenes, Cicero, Sylla, Charles V., Louis XIV., Frederick of Prussia, Napoleon, (prematurely old,) Voltaire, Jeffries, Dr. Johnson, Cromwell, Burke, Sheridan, Pope, Newton, Ruskin, Carlyle, Dean Swift, Chateaubriand, Rousseau, Milton, Lord Bacon, Earl Russell, Marlborough, Daniel Webster, Sumner and Greeley.

In some of these cases the decline was purely physiological, in others pathological, in the majority it was a combination of both.

Very few declined in *all* the moral faculties: one becomes peevish, another avaricious, another misanthropic, another mean and tyrannical, another exacting and querulous, another sensual, another cold and cruelly conservative, another excessively vain and ambitious, and others simply lose their *moral enthusiasm*, or their *moral courage* or their *capacity of resisting temptation and enduring disappointment*.

In discussing the noted statesmen of America, the lecturer stated that evidence derived from the recent political contest would be ruled out of court, because men could not now reason on that subject soberly or dispassionately. The question of the *abstract right or wrong* of the views held by these men in their youth and middle life was of little moment for our present purpose; it was only necessary to suppose that they believed them to be right. If any of their opponents, who honestly held different views, had similarly declined in moral enthusiasm for their views, they would illustrate the theme just as well. Some of these men were more wise in some respects *after their moral decline* than before. Nearly all political questions are questions of expediency, and not moral questions; very few carry moral convictions into politics, hence illustrations of the theme drawn from political life are rare.

What the lecturer had to say of the case of Mr. Greeley was written before his death, and before his last sickness, and had no reference to the last campaign. Since that time there had been fulfilled, sooner than was expected, and in a manner at once striking, tragical and romantic, the substantial truth of the prediction recorded in this lecture. There are various and sufficient evidences that the brain of Mr. Greeley during the last five or ten years of his life was never quite sound and strong. His brain at forty-five and fifty could have borne his domestic and political afflictions without serious harm.

The subject of the relation of age to work is a central one, and sheds light on many other sciences. It has important bearings on the theories of the origin, development and destiny of man, on biology in general, on medico-legal science, on the study of insanity and diseases of the nervous system, and on mental hygiene.

The whole subject of the relation of age to work would be discussed by the lecturer in full detail in an extended treatise now in preparation, where all its scientific and practical bearings would be exhaustively considered.

The lecture closed with these suggestions:

1. These facts should be considered in apportioning the work of the world; positions that require mainly *enthusiasm* and *original* work should be filled by the young and middle aged; positions that require mainly *experience* and routine work should be filled by those in mature and advanced life, or (as in clerkships) by the young who have not yet reached the golden decade.

The enormous stupidity and backwardness and red-tapeism of all departments of governments everywhere are partly due to the fact that they are too much controlled by age. The conservatism and inferiority of colleges are similarly explained. Some of those who control the policy of colleges—presidents and trustees—should be young or middle-aged.



Journalism, on the other hand, has suffered from relative excess of youth and enthusiasm.

2. It is sometimes a blessed thing to die young, or at least before extreme old age.

The fame of William the Silent, of Henry IV. of France, of Sidney and of Lincoln, is probably far purer than if they had lived longer and thus run the risk of moral decline. Thus a man may be immortalized by a murderer. If Daniel Webster had died a number of years sooner, his public fame would have been spotless for all time.

Raymond, as editor of the Times, would never have overthrown the Tammany Ring.

3. Moral decline in old age means *take care*, for the *brain is giving way*, and is very frequently preceded or accompanied by sleeplessness.

Decline of the moral faculties, like decline of other functions, may be relieved, retarded, and sometimes cured by proper medical treatment, and especially by hygiene.

In youth, middle life, and even in advanced age, one may suffer for years from disorders of the nervous system that cause derangement of some one or many of the moral faculties, and perfectly recover.

The symptoms should be taken early, and treated like any other physical disease. Our best asylums are now acting upon this principle, and with good success.

Medical treatment is almost powerless without hygiene. Study the divine art of taking it easy.

Men often die as trees die, slowly, and at the top first. As the moral and reasoning faculties are the *highest*, most complex and most delicate development of human nature, they are the first to show signs of cerebral disease; when they begin to decay, in advanced life, we are generally safe in predicting that, if neglected, other functions will sooner or later be impaired. When conscience is gone the constitution may soon follow.

Everybody has observed that greediness, ill temper, despondency, are oftentimes the *first* and *only* symptoms that disease is coming upon us. The moral nature is a delicate barometer that foretells long beforehand the coming storm in the system.

Moral decline as a symptom of cerebral disease, is, to say the least, as reliable as are many of the symptoms by which physicians are accustomed to make a diagnosis of various diseases of the organs of the body.

*When moral is associated with intellectual decline in advanced life, it is almost always safe to make a diagnosis of cerebral disease.* Acting on this evidence *alone*, the speaker had diagnosticated cerebral disease in Mr. Greeley a year before his death, and by the same evidence he predicted that Sumner would probably die of disease of the brain of some kind, and would never again be very eloquent or morally enthusiastic.

Let nothing deprive us of our sleep. Early to bed and *late* to rise, makes the modern brain-toiler healthy and wise.

The problem of the future is work hard and at the same time to take it easy. The more we have to do, the more we should sleep.

Let it never be forgotten that death in the aged is more frequently a slow *process*, than an event; a man may begin to die ten or fifteen years before he is buried.

4. These researches enforce the duty of especial kindness and charity for those in life's decline. The old are the wards of the young, and their moral defects, so often due to causes beyond their control, should at least receive as much consideration as diseases of a purely physical character.

There should be at least as much charity for a tired brain as for a broken leg.

Greeley, for example, was no more to be blamed for the moral declension of the last years of his life than for his insane ravings during his closing illness; his fault was back of all that, in overworking—in taking no vacation until he found a week in which to die.

These views, startling as they may just now appear, will in twenty-five years be regarded as commonplace. Their general acceptance will modify many medical, hygienic and political theories and customs, and will tend to diminish much of the unhappiness of the family and of the social circle.

